

9-18-2003

# In Praise of Seriousness

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## Recommended Citation

Warch, Richard, "In Praise of Seriousness" (2003). *Presidential Addresses*. 38.  
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“IN PRAISE OF SERIOUSNESS”  
WELCOME TO NEW STUDENTS AND PARENTS  
SEPTEMBER 18, 2003

Members of the Class of 2007 (or 2008—if you are a five-year student), upper-class transfer students, parents and families, on behalf of all of us who have been awaiting your arrival, it is my pleasure to add my welcome to those extended by Peter, Ms. Quinlan, Dean Murray, and Dean Syverson, and which will be echoed by many others before the day is out. As another college president said to another group of students on another occasion: You are more than welcome, you are now one of us. And we are glad that you are.

I’ve had the privilege of welcoming students to Lawrence since 1979, and I’m honored to be doing so again, though in this case for the last time. Tacitus wrote, “There is no greater pleasure than that which you believe you will not be enjoying for much longer,” and that sentiment will surely resonate with me on many occasions throughout the year, but certainly does so this morning. And while my message on this occasion is constant from year to year—and will thus be familiar to the upperclassmen and some of your parents, who have been here before—I trust it will be more or less new to those of you joining the Lawrence community this morning.

With your arrival yesterday and today, and with the return of the members of the upperclasses in the next few days, Lawrence begins its 156th year, and that fact should confirm that you thus enter a community of faculty and students who carry on a tradition of teaching and learning that, in American terms, approaches the venerable. And though venerable, our endeavors here are also new, refreshed each year by the influx of new members of the community.

Mr. Syverson has told you a bit about yourselves collectively, information that will explain in large measure why we are excited to have you with us. We are obviously delighted with the attributes and quality of this year’s entering cohort of Lawrentians. In joining our community, you bring your own distinctive characteristics and experiences to bear, and thus your coming alters and enriches the college.

Whatever your collective experiences up until this point, you now begin a new and important venture in life. In the years ahead, you will come to share experiences rooted in and derived from your Lawrence education and from the friendships you will develop here. Those of us who are here to help promote that education have been working hard to make your introduction to Lawrence successful. Many members of the faculty, in fact, have just completed an extensive symposium on Freshman Studies in order to be ready for you in the seminar rooms this year. On the physical plant front, we have just completed our most recent—and, on my watch at least, the last—major construction project; Hiatt Hall is the first new residence hall we have built here since the 1960s and, though freshmen won’t reside there, I do hope you will take time to visit and enjoy the amenities and the views. Frankly, I’m pleased that during my final year as president the campus will be devoid of construction equipment.

And so, here we are, at the moment that—given our academic year calendar—I’m sure many of you have felt has taken too long to materialize. But the moment has come, and you now join this college, the students directly and intimately, and the parents at some remove. To the parents, let me say that your sons and daughters, almost all of them for the first time, have taken a significant step away from home and have set themselves on an independent course. In the next four years, they will chart a destination in life. These will be years of change, of challenge, of options opened, of choices multiplied, of increased confidence, and expanded knowledge. And those features, embedded in this moment, are causes for both exhilaration and trepidation. The transitions ahead for you will not always be predictable, but I hope they will be ones you can embrace and affirm. Last year, Judith Shapiro, president of Barnard College, wrote an article entitled “Keeping Parents Off Campus,” in which she argued that parents’ investment in a child’s education should not involve micromanaging the college experience, but in encouraging their son or daughter “to reach out for opportunities in the classroom and beyond.” That’s good advice for parents to bestow as your children begin their higher education at Lawrence, advice I assure you the college will strive to have them realize, and advice I trust our new students will follow.

So this is a momentous time. It begins with the first confrontation with the residence hall room, which may be, generously speaking, about half the size of the one the student just left and is, to boot, to be shared with someone else. During the rest of the day and in the days to come, you will meet your classmates, your professors, and soon the returning Lawrentians, plan your course schedule, and begin your classes. It can all seem a bit overwhelming. This is also a time of expectation, and parents are surely hoping, trusting, wanting their son or daughter to be ready for Lawrence, to be successful at Lawrence, to enjoy Lawrence. Speaking for the college, please know that we have confidence that they are ready. We will fulfill the trust you place in us by striving to support them in being successful. And we have been dealing with young people of this age group long enough to be able to assure you that they will have plenty of moments of enjoyment.

Those of you who join us today as new students have completed the process of selecting and being selected by a college. In reviewing that process, many critics have said that today’s students are simply consumers shopping for a product. That is, I think, an unhappy and even demeaning view of the nature of today’s students, and especially of those of you gathered here. I’d prefer to believe that you are not shoppers so much as investors. And like any sound and prudent investor, you have taken the long view in your approach—in this case, the approach to your education. While metaphors drawn from the stock market may seem a bit risky these days, let me extend this one in any case to say that I encourage you to have faith in the long-term capital appreciation of liberal education. Its abiding value to you will be eventual, not always immediate; its import will be perpetual, not transitory. Liberal education is a growth stock; it appreciates in value and pays its dividends over a lifetime.

With that assessment in mind, then, I welcome you to your college and to your higher education. And I would like to take a few moments now not only to make this a time of welcome, but a time of introduction as well, an introduction I anticipated in the letter I wrote to parents a few weeks ago. Those of you who matriculate at Lawrence this week are no longer

outsiders, but insiders. As of today, you are a part of this academic community. And so I'd like to reflect with you for a few moments on what that academic community and what liberal education mean at Lawrence.

I have spoken of liberal education, and I use that phrase deliberately, for it comes closest to describing the total educational experience Lawrence seeks to promote. There are many places that offer courses in the liberal arts and sciences. And larger schools, obviously, offer more courses than we do, have more departments, divisions, and schools than we do. But—as my colleagues have heard me say untold times before—with that more comes less of what our less gives us more: individual attention, small classes, personal sharing, rigorous expectations, residential living, communal life. In short, liberal education with a difference, a difference that may be understood as placing the individual student at the center of the enterprise.

And so we take seriously not just what you learn, but how you live. To us, you are not a disembodied mind, but a person. We want you to be a spirited, engaged, and responsible person; someone who is tolerant of those different from yourself, indeed who welcomes the pluralism embodied in our community; a person who takes pleasure in the fine arts and appreciates beauty; a person who relishes a substantive conversation or even argument about values, public policy, national and world affairs, a novel, a film; a person who contributes meaningfully to the quality of campus life; a person who gives of his or her time and talent in service to others; a person whose interactions with fellow students will be playful and joyous and whose relationships will be caring and supportive. In those respects, then, your liberal education takes place not only in classrooms, laboratories, and studios, but also in the residence halls and commons, in the grill, in your room, and in your participation in a whole host of college activities and volunteer projects. It will take place in the personal friendships you will find and nurture here with faculty mentors and student peers.

Most of all, it will occur in confrontation and conversation with yourself. So I encourage you to focus your energies and enthusiasms on engaging both yourself and the college to the full. Education, as former Lawrence president Henry Merritt Wriston said, is growth, and it is your growth toward the full potential of your selfhood that is the aim of all that liberal education affords you. Liberal education enables you to choose and shape the persons you will become, and I hope you will come to understand your time here in those terms. Each of you will approach and realize that liberal education in quite individual ways in the college and in the conservatory. My counsel to you all, however, is to recognize that the attributes and attitudes that it enables you to acquire will not appear all at once; they will take time and I urge you to be both patient and persistent in your realization of them. As you do, your experience of your liberal education will enable you to know that education and to make it your own.

Most of all, enter this week, this term, this year, and your college with a sense of adventure. You will work harder than you have before, be challenged more than you have been before, and wrestle with your own independence and freedom in new and exciting ways. In your studies, you will confront ideas you've never imagined, encounter problems you've never experienced, meet people you've never dreamed of. It will be—it should be—great fun, a wonderful adventure, an exhilarating experience.

You will be tempted—and you will occasionally succumb to the temptation—to retreat from the life of the mind at college and conservatory to the life of the popular culture that otherwise surrounds you. I won't for a moment deny you that component of your lives, but I will certainly urge you to give it second billing. For it is what the college offers you that is not already familiar and comfortable that constitutes the reason you are here, not somewhere else tuned into the tube, the VCR, or the compact disc. You will learn from what is unfamiliar and challenging, not from what is common and comfortable. Students often come to college looking for their questions to be answered. At Lawrence, you will often find that your answers are questioned. One of my college professors celebrated what he called “uncomfortable learning,” which he saw—quite rightly, I think—as learning at its most powerful and persistent and meaningful. I encourage you to pursue such learning at Lawrence.

So in all that you do at Lawrence, I would encourage you to remember this: Your business here is to learn. You will live, and love, and laugh at Lawrence; but your business here is to learn. You will participate in sports and clubs and programs on campus; but your business here is to learn. Put another way—or put in the words of a recent article by Marshall Gregory—your “overriding concern should be how to develop as fully as possible [your] basic human birthright: [your] powers of imagination, aesthetic responsiveness, introspection, language, rationality, moral and ethical reasoning, physical capacities, and so on. Those are the powers that students must cultivate if they wish to strive for excellence.” We're here to enable and promote and stimulate that striving and your learning, but it is, in the last analysis, your business. Take it seriously. What we do here—what each of us does and what we do collectively—is serious business, which is not the same thing as saying it is precious or pretentious business or somber or cheerless business. It really is exciting and life-changing business. And each of us contributes to that excitement to the extent that we pursue our own education seriously and thus contribute our seriousness of purpose to the community at large, that we nurture and support each other's seriousness, if you will.

One of the great joys and triumphs of the college years will be the sheer pleasure and reward of that kind of seriousness. The faculty will both encourage and expect such seriousness of you; you will find them, individually and collectively, eager to promote your education, but not people who will take kindly to passivity or indifference or a cavalier approach to your studies. The personal and intellectual attributes and achievements that got you here are the very ones we want you to extend and expand over the coming term and years. You are young women and men of accomplishment and promise, and you have, in many ways and in various settings, demonstrated initiative and drive. And those qualities will be of central importance for you here. Education at Lawrence is not something you're given but something you get. Go get it. And you will find, as you do, that education will mean more to you and will give you greater self-esteem by virtue of your investment of time and energy in obtaining it.

As you make that investment, be open to new experiences and expressions. Each of you will, inevitably and properly, pursue courses of study that most stimulate and engage you. But in the course of your undergraduate years, I hope you will also venture into some heretofore unfamiliar territory, explore some new terrain. Make it your business to attend a lecture on a topic with which you are not conversant; go to hear a convocation address by a speaker you may not have heard of (this year, that means author and playwright David Sedaris—of whom I

suspect many of you *have* heard; renowned cognitive scientist and author Steve Pinker; author and artist Susan Ariel Rainbow Kennedy, who goes by SARK; and environmental historian and author William Cronon); listen to a concert of music that will be fresh to you—and be especially attentive to the opportunities to hear Lawrence’s own exemplary ensembles and visiting artists; engage in serious conversation about important topics with persons of backgrounds and positions other than your own. In short, let the many aspects of the college and of the community open for you by being open to them.

One of the hardest things to accept about liberal education—though it seems so obvious as to be unworthy of mention—is that it only occurs when you confront something you did not already know or when you learn that what you thought you already knew isn’t quite as it seemed or when you are told that what you think about a topic and the ways in which you express that thought are wrong or wanting.

Henry Rosovsky, who led a curriculum reform movement at Harvard over a decade ago, proposed the disarmingly and deceptively simple dictum that people do not know what they do not know. One of the purposes of college is to deal with that fact by introducing you to what you do not know, which means, of course, to expose you to the unfamiliar, the novel, and the alien and encourage you to confront and come to grips with what you do not know.

Writing some years ago in *The New Yorker* about five Orthodox Jewish students who wanted to be relieved of the obligation to live on campus at Yale because the conditions in the residence halls violated their religious convictions, David Denby notes that this issue offers a fundamental challenge to the very nature of the university. “One thing that separates a faith community from a leaning community,” he writes, “is that in the latter, one’s preconceptions are constantly, and productively under duress. The experience of confronting both new ideas and people who think differently from oneself has traditionally formed the heart of a liberal education.”

Liberal education is violated, then, when students either avoid or seek to be protected from the unfamiliar and from challenges to their preconceptions and worldviews, wherever those are confronted, either in courses or in persons. Whether in the case of the so-called Yale Five, who wish to be removed from the company of people with values other than their own, or the case of a student at Baylor who got the university to agree to substitute books she found objectionable in a literature course with ones she found acceptable, protecting students from the unfamiliar and uncomfortable may be seen as damaging the very purposes of liberal learning. The aim of a liberal education, rather, is to force you to come to terms with the “other,” both persons and ideas.

That openness to the unfamiliar and the novel is an exceedingly important attribute to develop as you live your lives at Lawrence. For if you leave here with your values and world view unchallenged and unscathed; if you depart in four years with your taste in music undifferentiated from your taste today; if you graduate from here with your leisure reading preferences on world affairs; or if you come to the end of your Lawrence career with a circle of friends and unchanged from those you possess at present; if you spend four years here with the same outlook acquaintances composed solely of those like the ones you left at home, you’ve

failed to take advantage of the college and of the community. In short, take the advice that Rabbit gave to Winnie-the-Pooh when Pooh was stuck halfway out Rabbit's hole: "Having come this far, it's a shame to waste it." You've come this far; don't waste it. And especially don't waste it when it comes to meeting others from different parts of the country and world, with different experiences and interests. We count as faculty at Lawrence this year over 20 men and women born outside the United States; and we have in our number 167 students from 45 foreign countries, including fourteen from Waseda University in Japan. Just as those students and faculty will strive to meet and know those of us who are citizens of the United States, those of us who hail from here should make it our business to meet fellow students and faculty from elsewhere, and to let their perspectives and experiences inform and influence ours. Gerald Brennan wrote, "Everyone alters and is altered by everyone else. We are all the time taking in portions of one another or else reacting against them, and by these involuntary acquisitions and repulsions modifying our natures." Let your natures be modified at Lawrence.

Above all, relish your days and years here. Your decision to enroll at Lawrence is an important step in the process of choosing a destination in life, of shaping the person you will become. Do not treat the array of opportunities before you as a burden, but as a release. You are free to create yourself anew, to build a life, to choose, to dream. Seize that freedom.

That constitutes my principal piece of advice. And with that I will say, once again, welcome to Lawrence and to your higher education. We're glad you're here.